HUMOR OF THE BLEACHERS

Drawings by F. Foster Lincoln

By BILLY EVANS

"So You Caught the Ball Dropped from the Washington Monument!"

"IF that lobster is going to twirl, I guess I'll go home," exclaims a fan, as the announcer makes known the battery for the game. "It seems as if that joke starts to pitch every game I get to see. He lasts just long enough to spoil the contest."

"The only thing that mutt can pitch is hay," remarks his neighbor, who is equally disgusted at the manager's selection.

"Why, he hasn't beaten this team for a couple of years! I can't understand why they don't pitch Smith. He is always effective against this club."

"Beat this team? I haven't seen that fellow finish a game this year! Pretty soft how some people get the money." This from another member of Rooters' Row.

If you have always enjoyed a seat in the grandstand there are a lot of things about the great national game that you have missed. To mingle with the wise men of baseball, the men who know how to manage better than the managers, play better than the players, and umpire better than the umpires, you must take a seat in the bleachers, at a cost of either two or four bits.

In the grandstand you are a bit closer to the athletes, you get a better view of the contest; but you miss the opinions of those master minds of the game, the bleacherites. There is a certain kind of enthusiasm shown in the grandstand; but American gentlemen, out of respect to the fair sex, tone down their expression of their opinions. Seldom is a woman seen in the bleachers, and as a result men say and do things there with reckless abandon.

The fans can make or break a player. They have unmade a great many. Poor playing is invariably resented. Frequently there is little choice used in the manner of showing disgust. Little allowance is made for the slumps that must come to the ball tosser, who is really a child of the public. He must accept its approval or disapproval without a murmur, if he is wise and hopes to succeed. It is surprising what a part the opinion of fandom plays in the career of the average player. It takes a mighty game fellow to succeed when public opinion is all against him. There are some players who have won over the fans after having stood very low in their estimation; but these players are the exception to the rule. Invariably a player's success in a certain city is determined largely by the attitude of the patrons toward him.

ST. LOUIS fans did not believe that Cy Morgan could pitch. They were never a bit backward about telling him so. When he went out to start a game it was the signal for an outburst of disapproval. There was no encouragement, nothing to work for. Seldom was he able to pitch more than three or four innings. Even when the St. Louis manager had no intention of using him, he was jeered while on his way from the clubhouse to the players' bench. That this had its effect on him there was no doubt. I once heard him remark to Jimmy McAleer, who was then managing St. Louis:

"Say, Jimmy, I wish you would put in a subway from the clubhouse to the bench. I could fool some of the boys then by making them believe you had released me." Morgan laughed and did a little jig, to let it be known that he was just "kidding"; but there was a lot of reality in what he said. He was finally let out; but later pitched good ball for both Boston and Philadelphia.

"Well, if it ain't my old friend Mr. C. Smith, the lemon kid!" was the greeting Charley Smith received several years ago as he left the bench just as he was announced as pitcher for the Washington club in the opening game of the season. It was a "gentleman of color" who had expressed his greetings. Before he reached the box half a hundred such tributes had been paid him. When he walked the first man, and hit the next, there was a chorus of:

"Same old Smith—same old lemon!"

It was a bad start; but Charley managed to weather the storm of that inning. During the rest of the game he was invincible, and won a clean-cut victory. This clever pitcher wasted much time without showing to advantage in Washington, simply because the fans could not see him. He is now a member of the Chicago Cubs, and is going nicely in the National.

If you are a patron of the grandstand, and should feel that you desire something different, make a trip to the bleachers some day. You may not care to become a regular there; but I am sure you will enjoy one afternoon of it. I'll take the grandstand myself, when I assume the role of spectator; for it is safer and saner. But if you want to see the real, dyed-in-the-wool fans, the fellows who understand the game better than the chap that fixed up the rules, you must mingle with those who pay twenty-five or fifty cents.

A FEW years ago I happened to have an off day in New York, and journeyed to the ball park with Messrs. O'Loughlin and Egan, who were to umpire the game. I took a seat in the bleachers, to see and enjoy the game from the viewpoint of a bleacherite.

It is surprising to note how many fellows there are at a ball game who get as much enjoyment from kidding the players or umpires as they do from watching the contest. If the game happens to be very one-sided, the spectators often figure that the only way to get their money's worth is at the expense of the umpires or players, and the satisfaction some of them get from the part they figure they played in the outcome of the contest is remarkable.

Anything more lifeless than a contest in which fans, players, and umpires agreed on all points would be hard to imagine, and the patrons of the game do not want it that way. Difference of opinion is the spice of baseball. Fans delight in praising a player for a meritorious play, and get just as much satisfaction from kidding or criticizing a stupid exhibition. The bleacherites will forgive an error much more quickly than they will a boneheaded play. Also they delight in showing the umpire wherein he is wrong. And umpires really make mistakes, despite assertions to the contrary. Silence, however, is the best an umpire can expect when he is correct, which he is in a majority of cases.

After having secured a seat right among the fans, I awaited developments. The first ball delivered to a New York batter was declared a strike by Silk O'Laughlin, who was working behind the plate. There was no objection on the part of the player; but from a dozen voices in the bleachers came the words:

"Call 'em right!"—"Get 'em up!"—"The ball was a foot outside!"—"Give us what's coming to us, Silk!"

My neighbor at my right was the critic who had informed Silk that the ball was a foot outside. Turning to him, I asked:

"Was that ball really a foot outside?"

"Nearer two feet," he answered, just as Silk called a second strike on the New Yorker.

"Come out of the trance, Silk! Pinch yourself! You're asleep!"

"What was the matter with that one?" I asked.

"Inside. Inside," he answered. "You must be as blind as O'Loughlin."

"Isn't O'Loughlin supposed to be one of the best umpires in the business?"

"Some days he is," said my friend curtly. "This looks like one of his isn't days to me."

Two or three innings later there was a close play at the plate which Silk decided against New York. It was a play that a fellow had to be right over in order to render a decision, and even then it was so close, Silk afterward told me, that it would have been possible to give it either way. To Silk at the moment the player appeared to have been put out, and the verdict was so rendered.

"The worst decision I ever saw Silk make," said my neighbor, who was nearly worn out by his exertion, despite the fact that the game was just about half played. "Why, the catcher hasn't touched Hal yet! He missed him by a good foot."

"It looked like two feet to me," I replied.

Whereupon my friend turned to me with a smile, and extending his hand said, "Your eyes are all right—better than mine, I guess. I must beg your pardon for anything I have said about your need of glasses."

"Don't you think O'Loughlin is in a better position to see the play than we are?" I asked.

"He might be in a better position; but, my friend, I honestly believe I can see better round a corner than any member of the American League staff can see straightaway."

I could not refrain from smiling; although I was as directly concerned as Silk was.

In the final inning there was a play at the plate that would give the game to New York if Silk called the man safe. It appeared to O'Loughlin that he was, and he so ruled, deciding the contest, despite strenuous protesting from a number of the visiting players. No sooner had the decision been given than my neighbor darted out of the bleachers and on the field. I followed. By edging through the crowd he got to Silk, and patting him on the back exclaimed:

"You're all right, Silk. Never saw you boot one in my life. That fellow was safe a mile."

After having another laugh by myself, I made my way to the dressing room and related the story of my afternoon's experience to the umpires.

AMONG the laughs I had that same afternoon, and one of the best I ever had, was one at the expense of big Jim Vaughan, then pitching for New York. It was so good that I had to repeat it to the husky southpaw the next day, and, even though it was at his expense, Jim's sense of humor compelled him to enjoy the repartee of this second fan.

Vaughan happened to be having a run of hard luck. Although he appeared to have everything, the opposition took all kinds of liberty with his delivery, and usually after an inning or so Jim would be derricked and shunted to the clubhouse for the rest of the afternoon.

"Is that Jim Vaughan?" asked one of our group who was evidently a stranger in New York, of my friend on the left, as Vaughan walked across the field just before the game began.

"Don't know," said the fan. "First time I ever had a look at that fellow's face. Resembles the pictures, though, I have seen of Vaughan in the papers."

"Thought you were a regular New York fan," said the stranger.

"You've got me right. But I'm generally an inning late getting to the game, and Vaughan is always going the other way when I arrive."

OF course there are a lot of comedians and near-comedians at every game; but I believe I have heard more funny things said on the Washington grounds than at any other park in the American League. Everyone who knows Joe Cantillon realizes what a hard fellow he is to best in a battle of wits. He always has a ready answer. I shall repeat a bit of conversation between Cantillon and a fan in the bleachers several years ago, when Cantillon was managing the Washington club.

When the old park at Washington was still in use the end of the Washington bench ran right up to the bleachers back of first base. As everyone knows, it gets hot in Washington, and on the sultry days it was customary

Master Minds of the Game—the Bleacherites.